

The political economy of culture

In the preface of 'Empire' Hardt and Negri emphasize that 'our argument aims to be equally philosophical and historical, cultural and economic, political and anthropological... In the imperial world the economist, for example, needs a basic knowledge of cultural production to understand the economy, and likewise the cultural critic needs a basic knowledge of economic processes to understand culture. That is a requirement that our project demands.' (xvi) This is an ambitious but necessary approach for an exploration of contemporary capitalism. In the following part I attempt to study the theoretical framework H/N develop to realize this requirement. My interest does not refer primarily to the astonishing interdisciplinary perspective employed by the authors in general, but more specifically to the relation between culture and economy, which as H/N observe, seems to be significant for an understanding of the concept of Empire. Empire, the authors indicate in the preface, is as much a cultural concept as it is a political and economical one.

I want to ask in this section of our poly-authored review how H/N conceptualize the relation between culture and economy. How do they theorize the notion of culture and what is their take on the problematics of economy? It is much easier to begin with the latter. The realm of economy is not perceived as fixed and stable, but as historical and transient. The main story of the book is the passage from imperialism to Empire. This story is supported by two substories, one being the genealogy of political ideas (part 2), the other the genealogy of Empire's global economic order (part 3). H/N analysis of economic transformations does not really focus on consumption but on the spheres of production and accumulation. (Fn: One of the few references to practices of consumption occurs in the analysis of the differences between the Fordist and the Taylorist model of production. Whereas the Fordist model did not have to listen to the market, the Taylorist model is characterized by an intensive communication and permanent feedback loops between production and consumption. Thus H/N recognize the growing importance of consumption in Empire's economic mode, but their analysis is based on the passages of production.) After decades of paying attention mainly to the realm of consumption I find this a refreshing shift of perspectives. Production is understood in a very broad sense, ranging from goods and services to the production of information, knowledge, and social relations, from traditional commodities to the production of the soul. Indeed there is a passage from the production of material towards immaterial objects. Drawing on Marx distinction between formal and real subsumption and in accordance with David Harvey's and Fredric Jameson's theories, H/N see postmodernity as a new phase of capitalist accumulation. Modern accumulation has been based on the formal subsumption of non-capitalist environments. But now in postmodernity capital does not have an outside any more. This is when processes of real subsumption emerge. Real subsumption is not about the integration of a capitalist outside, not about expansion, but about intensification. That what becomes more intensive is on the one hand the 'integration of labor into capital' (255), and on the other hand commodification itself. This refers to a commodification of subjectivity, of nature, and of social relationships. The economy of imperialism is characterized by the subsumption of a non-capitalist outside under the rules of capital. In Empire there is no outside, thus capitalist accumulation is not predominantly expansive but mainly intensive. In a nutshell, economic development is described by two tendencies. In capitalist production there is a shift from material to immaterial objects, and from material to immaterial labor.

In capitalist accumulation there is a shift from expansion and integration (formal subsumption) to intensification (real subsumption).

So much about their take on economy. But how do they deal with the notion of culture? This is less clear and less explicit. Repeatedly H/N acknowledge the relevance of culture for an analysis of late/postmodern/global capitalism. However it is difficult to find an explicit argument on culture in the book. The authors do not develop or even refer to any theories or concepts of culture, not to mention genealogies of culture. Culture in *Empire* seems to play the role of the background in a modern painting - important as context, framing or structure, but still in the background, not worthy enough to be looked at by itself. But this is not the whole story. The book is full of themes strongly linked to the realm of culture. There are, perhaps most importantly, the issues of subjectivity, soul, pure life, biopower, and biopolitics. There is the claim, that modern or imperialistic orders with their clear distinction between inside and outside have been superseded by a postmodern or imperial order that only knows and produces degrees of hybridity and artificiality. There is the distinction between an old biological racism, and a new cultural racism based on national or ethnic differences. There is the blurring of boundaries between private and public spaces. There are ideologies and values. There is a growing importance of immaterial labor, of affect, communication, information, knowledge, and networking. There is a global market thriving on circulation, mobility, diversity, difference, and hybridity. There are corporate cultures and cultures of social movements. Finally there is an outline of imperial command, which is first of all cultural. *Empire's* apparatus of power is described as inclusive, differential, and managerial.

Culture in modernity, it seems, stands somehow in contrast to nature and biology. It is something that is made. Nature seems to be constructed too, but not as much. 'We are accustomed to thinking that nature and biology are fixed and immutable but that culture is plastic and fluid.' (192). It is only in the postmodern world that 'all phenomena and forces are artificial.' (187) Nature has been overcome.

As H/N do not introduce a definition or concept of culture, it is a difficult task to understand how they link culture and economy. They observe an 'increasing indistinguishability of economic and cultural phenomena' (275). But how does this show? And why are both culture and economy becoming inseparable? What are the historical reasons that bring both realms closer together? On the one hand culture has become industrialized. 'Previous stages of industrial revolution introduced machine-made consumer goods and then machine-made machines, but now we find ourselves confronted with machine-made raw materials and foodstuff - in short, machine-made nature and machine-made culture.' (272) There are however some indications in the book that H/N perceive the notion or the idea of culture as more or less historically stable. Thus a genealogy of culture does not seem to be important for the authors. The transforming factors seem to be cultural contents like meanings, values, ideologies, and social practices. These values, ideologies, and practices however are not described as machine-made, on the contrary they are perceived as both somehow authentic (even if H/N would never use this term), and as powerful. This can perhaps best be illustrated in some of their writing on social movements in the 1960s and 70s (272-276). These social movements initiated an assault on the disciplinary regime, which no longer succeeded in containing the needs and desires of young people. This transvaluation of values opened the way for a transformation of labor power. That is to say the new values of new social movements and new subjectivities - mobility, flexibility, cooperation, affect, communication, creativity, and playfulness - became

the defining values of late capitalist production in the subsequent decades. H/N explicitly focus on the economic relevance of social movements. They stress their 'profound economic power' (275).

In short, H/N perception of culture is ambivalent, to say the least. They see a historical development towards the spectacle and towards a machine-made and artificial culture, which is not too far away from Horkheimer's and Adorno's analysis of cultural industries. But they also see culture as a potential for positive change, culture embedded in social movements which bring about transvaluation of values and transformations of economic production and labor power. Are both perceptions of culture intrinsically connected? Regrettably, H/N do not elaborate on these issues any further.

One of the main themes in 'Empire' is an analysis and critique of contemporary capitalism. It is the attempt to write a critique of political economy for the 21st century. This critique constantly navigates between Marx and poststructuralism. If for nothing else, this attempt justifies all the attention and credit 'Empire' received so far. 'Empire' leaves behind traditional political economy concepts. As Negri (1999: 79) states elsewhere, there is a need to reconsider the problems of value and political economy not from above but 'from below'. Perhaps one of the strongest ideas in the book is the assertion that in Empire value (in particular the value of labor power) is beyond measure. The measurement of value, H/N argue, has always been linked to a transcendent order. On the plane of pure immanence value is outside measure, is immeasurable. According to H/N even Marx's theory of value really is a theory 'of the measurement of value' (355). 'Today labor is immediately a social force animated by the powers of knowledge, affect, science and language. Indeed, labor is the productive activity of a general intellect and a general body outside measure. Labor appears simply as the power to act.' (357) As labor became increasingly immaterial (affective, informational, analytic and symbolic), the possibilities of measuring its value (its exchange value) in calculable quantities continuously declined.

This is a powerful hypothesis, one with serious economic consequences, if true. The developments of the stock market in the last five years support it in a way. The tremendous rise of shares related to new economy sectors and their successive decline reflects the problem of measuring ideas, information, and innovation. Indeed this may well be the real reason for the rise and fall of the new economy. But is the same true for affective labor and for sectors linked to the so-called attention economy and to service industries (nurses, waitresses etc.)? I would insist on these distinctions and argue that the problem of measuring labor value is much more visible in those forms of immaterial labor that are connected to information, knowledge, ideas, and innovation, and less difficult with forms of affective labor.

The problem with H/N's powerful hypothesis is that it lacks a more careful elaboration. Furthermore it needs to be put in the context of competing ideas and discussions. For example how does this relate to Bourdieu's theory of different forms of capital? Cultural capital and social capital clearly are - like immaterial labor - not measurable on scales. Bourdieu's qualitative mode of measurement - that is high and low cultural or social capital - is not based on calculation, but on judgement. Further how does it relate to the work of a French group of economic sociologists labeled 'the economics of convention' (Boltanski/Thevenot 1991; Chiapello 1998; Boltanski/Chiapello 1999)? This group develops a sociological theory of value. This body of work is based on the premise that value is not only based on (one way of) economic calculation, but on multiple principles of evaluation and multiple orders of

worth. Here social and cultural values are not counterposed to economic value, in fact they are constitutive of value, they are the fabric of calculation and rationality.

Finally how does this relate to Baudrillard (19xx) who developed a political economy of the sign? Baudrillard argues with de Saussure's semiotics against Marx's theory of value. Sign value, obviously, is a category relating to and challenging Marx's value theory, particularly Marx differentiation between exchange value and use value. Use value has a functional logic, exchange value represents an economic logic, and sign value obeys the logic of difference. Use value refers to the object, exchange value to the commodity, and sign value to code and meaning. For Baudrillard, use value and exchange value have become more or less the same. So far H/N would agree. But Baudrillard's most important point is that it is not use value which should be contrasted with exchange value, but symbolic exchange which should be contrasted with commodity exchange. For him the main problem is not the immeasurability of economic (calculative) value but the supremacy of sign value. He points out that the signifiers themselves, not the products, had become objects of consumption. What keeps late capitalism alive is not so much the fact that people need to work in order to fulfill their basic needs and make a living, but that they need to exchange codes and thereby create distinction.

'Empire' is a book with an enormous scope of themes and issues, perhaps too many. So it seems a little bit unfair to tell H/N off for ignoring theorists I consider important for any discussion of cultural capitalism. Similarly it seems to be a little bit unfair to tell them off for not giving culture the same attention they reserve for a genealogy of economy and a genealogy of governance (political philosophy). To me however this is the core problem of the book. I fully agree with the author's critique of any macrotheoretical critique of capitalism. No doubt it is time to develop a political economy from below. Such a political economy from below should offer more than the claim that Empire or global capitalism does not only produce goods and machines and services, but also subjectivities, culture, and nature. 'Empire' as an analysis of capitalism remains in the realm of political economy. It neglects most aspects and theories of a cultural economy. In my view only a synthesis of a political economy perspective with a cultural economy approach will open up a better understanding of late or global capitalism. This is where the journey should begin.